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ABSTRACT

To better understand the turn-of-the-century United States, this interdisciplinary lesson (covering 6-8 weeks) integrates use of primary resources with historical and literary analysis. Students work in groups and express themselves creatively through a multi-media epic poem. The artistic models for the students' multi-media epic poem are Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" (1855) and Hart Crane's "The Bridge" (1930). While completing this unit, students will: identify and interpret primary source documents within an historical context; evaluate and appreciate the dynamic nature life in the United States in a time of transition; recognize and then employ poetic skills: line, metaphor, symbol, image, form, meter, and other stylistic considerations; and integrate creative writing, historical analysis, and technology. This 10th through 12th grade lesson plan is suited for American History or American Literature, preferably together. (PM)

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The Learning Page... lesson plans

1900 America: Historical Voices, Poetic Visions.

By

Chris Beckmann and David Gehler

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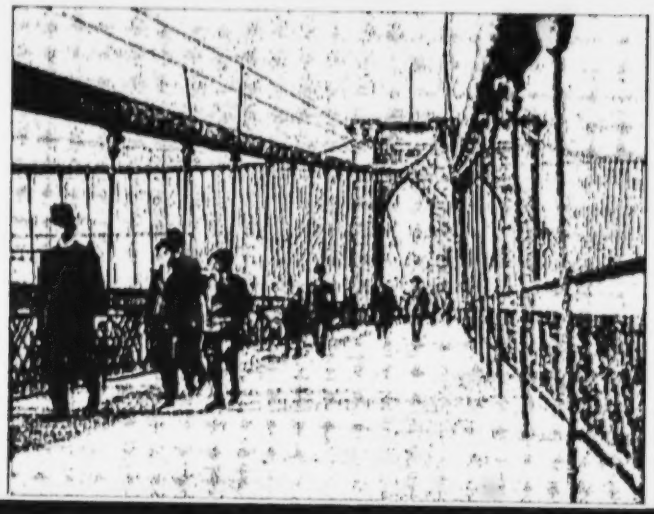

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By Chris Beckmann and David Gehler

American Memory Fellows 2000

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Historical Voices, Poetic Visions

Overview

To better understand the turn-of-the-century United States, this interdisciplinary lesson integrates use of primary resources with historical and literary analysis. Students work in groups and express themselves creatively through a multi-media epic poem.

The artistic models for the students' multi-media epic poem are Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself* (1855) and Hart Crane's *The Bridge* (1930). These epic poets capture, interpret, and give meaning to their particular time and place. Students look to do the same with the year 1900, relying upon relevant primary resources — sounds, images, words — and their own creative and interpretative voices.

Objectives

While completing this unit, students will:

- identify and interpret primary source documents within an historical context;
- evaluate and appreciate the dynamic nature life in the United States in a time of transition;
- recognize and then employ poetic skills: line, metaphor, symbol, image, form, meter, and other stylistic considerations; and
- integrate creative writing, historical analysis, and technology.

Time Required

Six to eight weeks

Recommended Grade Level

10-12

Curriculum Fit

American History or American Literature, preferably together

Resources Used

American Memory

- The African-American Experience in Ohio: Selections from the Ohio Historical Society
- American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 - 1940
- By Popular Demand: Jackie Robinson and Other Baseball Highlights, 1860s-1960s
- "California as I Saw It": First-Person Narratives of California's Early Years, 1849-1900
- Historic American Sheet Music, 1850-1920
- Inventing Entertainment: the Early Motion Pictures and Sound Recordings of the Edison Companies
- Touring Turn-of-the-Century America: Photographs from the Detroit Publishing Company, 1880 - 1920

Other sources

- *The American Experience: America 1900*. Alexandria, Virginia: PBS, 1998, (http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/1900/index.html), accessed February 4, 2002.
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- *Voices and Visions: Walt Whitman*. United States: The New York Center for Visual History, 1987.

Overview | Teacher's Guide

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Last updated 06/10/2002

Teacher's Guide

Procedure

- Introduction to the Epic Poem Project - one class period
- Introduction to the Epic Poem Format - two class periods
- Using American Memory - several class periods spread over six to eight weeks
- Mid-point Assessment - one class period
- Presentations - two to three class periods

Evaluation

Each group will be evaluated according to the following criteria:

- Adherence to all deadlines
  1. Group selection
  2. Focus topic selection
  3. Outline
- Historical accuracy
  1. How thorough was the research?
  2. Are there any key omissions or anachronisms?
- Creativity and ambition
  1. How well does each poem adhere to the styles of Whitman and Crane?
  2. Do the poets take genuine artistic chances?
  3. Do they make sound artistic choices?
- Coherence and consistency of voice and vision
  1. How well does each poem adhere to the format established in the outline?

Extension

Substitute Homer for Whitman and Crane and this assignment could be adapted for a World History Class.

Introduction to the Epic Poem Project

Project Information

This project requires historical research and analytical skills as well as the creative vision of a poet. Present the project in class approximately three weeks prior to your unit on turn-of-the-century America.

1. Assign students or allow them to self-select into groups of two to four persons depending on class size. Groups should also form with attention to individual skills. For instance, talented poets should work with someone who can create quality PowerPoint presentations.

2. Have each group choose a specific topic of historical and creative focus from the following:

   - labor
   - expansionsim
   - music
   - leisure
   - politics
   - urbanism
   - religion
   - science
   - transportation
   - industry
   - women
   - the West
   - immigration
   - agriculture

3. Based on the chosen topic, each group creates a verse text and an 8-10 minute PowerPoint presentation to support the words with pictures, film, and sounds from American Memory. These multi-media epics will be presented before the entire class in six to eight weeks.

Kickoff Exercise

1. List these column headings on the blackboard
   - Unifying Themes
   - Unifying Images
   - Relevant Past
   - Current Data
   - Future Vision

2. Tell the class that they are writing an epic poem of the United States in 2000.

3. Ask students to brainstorm for data to fill the blank columns.

4. Through this exercise, students not only discern what types of historical evidence to search for, but also appreciate the ambitious thematic and data elements that constitute an epic poem.

Introduction to the Epic Poem Format

Introduce the Epic Poem format as rendered through Whitman and Crane. Epic poetry is, in a sense, the writing, or chronicling, of history through the eyes of a poet.

1. Have students read the poem, *Song of Myself*, by Walt Whitman.
2. Discuss how Whitman's style captures the spirit of a maturing and confident nation in the 1850s; also discuss how he provides detailed historical data for New York City prior to the Civil War as he painstakingly records shop names, advertisements, and other ephemera.
3. Have students read the poem, *The Bridge*, by Hart Crane.
4. Compare Crane's style to Walt Whitman's, discussing how it reflects the 1920s, another transformative era. Also discuss his use of the relevant past and the focus upon the Brooklyn Bridge as a unifying metaphor of the age.
5. Discuss how these models bracket the selected time period and offer numerous stylistic examples for student experimentation.
6. Review the Epic Poem Project. Remind students that they are to create an epic poem about a current theme in 1900 America.

Using American Memory

1. Prior to this lesson, arrange for at least one class period per week, for a six to eight week span, in the school computer lab. During this time, students can learn to navigate the site, identify relevant texts, and analyze their meaning within the particular historical context and each group's specific focus topic.

2. Before bringing the students to the computer lab, bookmark the following American Memory collections:
   - The African-American Experience in Ohio: Selections from the Ohio Historical Society
   - American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 - 1940
   - By Popular Demand: Jackie Robinson and Other Baseball Highlights, 1860s-1960s
   - "California as I Saw It": First-Person Narratives of California's Early Years, 1849-1900
   - Historic American Sheet Music, 1850-1920
   - Inventing Entertainment: the Early Motion Pictures and Sound Recordings of the Edison Companies
   - Touring Turn-of-the-Century America: Photographs from the Detroit Publishing Company, 1880 - 1920

3. Once in the computer lab, introduce students to Using Primary Sources in the Classroom.

4. Give students a brief introduction to American Memory.

5. Discuss different Media Analysis Tools, which can help students to look for deeper meaning in the primary sources.

6. In your weekly visits to the computer lab, have students search the bookmarked collections for items to include in their PowerPoint presentations.

Note: While time in class is provided for searching American Memory, out of class/after school tutorial sessions are crucial for success in this endeavor.

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Using Primary Sources in the Classroom

Suggestions for using primary sources were compiled from the National Digital Library's Educators' Forum held in July, 1995 and from the Library staff. Educators at the Forum, like many throughout the country, know that history comes alive for students who are plugged into primary sources. These suggestions for student activities can help you enhance your social studies curriculum using authentic artifacts, documents, photographs, and manuscripts from the Library of Congress Historical Collections and other sources.

Source Types:
Objects | Images | Audio | Statistics | The Community

I. Source Type: Objects

Sample Primary Sources: artifacts, tools, weapons, inventions, uniforms, fashion

Make a hypothesis about the uses of an unknown object pictured in an old photograph. Use online and library research to support or refute the hypothesis. Make a presentation to the class to "show and tell" the object, hypothesis, search methods, and results.

Use old photographs to study fashion trends. How has fashion changed over time? How did clothing styles reflect people's work and their roles in society? What clothing styles have carried over into present times?

Study old photographs to trace the development of an invention over time (examples: automobiles, tractors, trains, airplanes, weapons). What do the photographs tell you about the technology, tools, and materials available through time? Who used the invention in the past? How is the invention used today?

Sample Primary Sources: tombstones

Write an obituary for a person memorialized on an old tombstone. Use information from the epitaph and research about the era in which the person lived. Research the meaning of stone carvings that appear on the tombstone. Study epidemic illnesses or other circumstances the might explain common causes of death at the time.

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II. Source Type: Images

Sample Primary Sources: photographs, film, video

Use a historic photograph or film of a street scene. Give an oral description of the sights, sounds, and smells that surround the scene, presenting evidence from the photograph itself and other sources about the time period. Examine the image to find clues about the economics and

commerce of the time.

Select a historical photograph or film frame. Predict what will happen one minute and one hour after the photograph or film was taken. Explain the reasoning behind your predictions.

To encourage focus on detail, show a photograph or film frame to the classroom for three minutes and then remove it. Have students draw the contents of the image on a piece of paper divided into a grid of nine sections. Repeat this exercise with new images and watch students' ability to recall detail improve.

Sample Primary Sources: fine art

Select a piece of fine art that appeals to your senses. Research the artist, the date of the piece, and the medium. What does information about the artist, the medium, the subject, and the composition tell you about the prevailing attitudes and conditions of the time period? (For example, what symbolism is used? how is perspective used? in what roles are people portrayed? what is left out of the composition?)

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III. Audio

Sample Primary Sources: oral histories, interviews

Research your family history by interviewing relatives. Use letters, audio recordings, and videotape to compile a report on an important time for your family. Make note of differing recollections about the same event.

Work in teams to record interviews of older citizens in the community. Focus on and compile interviews on one aspect of community life such as work, family, or schools. Combine class reports with historical images and documents to produce a documentary on the history of your community.

Sample Primary Sources: music

Research and study lyrics of popular songs from the periods of World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. What do the lyrics tell you about public attitudes toward the war? Interview veterans of these wars about their perception of the accuracy of the information in the lyrics.

Have students search for events that have inspired lyrics in current popular music. Have students compare present day events and music to lyrics from the past inspired by historical events. What are the similarities and differences between present day and historical songs and the events that inspired them?

Sample Primary Sources: audio recordings

Introduce an audio recording of a famous political speech. Ask students to think about and write down impressions while they listen to the speech. What is the speaker's key message? What is the speaker's point of view? How does the speaker's oratory style affect the impact of the message? If the text of the speech is available, have students compare impressions from hearing the speech to impressions from reading the speech.

Have students listen to audio recordings from old radio broadcasts. Compare the language, style of speaking, and content to radio and television programs today. How does the content of the older radio broadcast exemplify the events and prevailing attitudes of the time? How does modern radio and television programming exemplify events and attitudes of the present time?

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IV. Statistics

Sample Primary Sources: census data, land surveys, maps, ordinances, blueprints, or architectural drawings

Study historical maps of a city, state, or region to find evidence of changes in population, industry, and settlement over time. Use other resources to find and report on causes for the changes you find. Use maps to illustrate your descriptions of these changes.

Choose a famous, historical, public building in your area. Research blueprints or architectural drawings of the building. With help from an architect or librarian, compare the plans to the building as it exists today. What changes do you see? Why do you think the changes occurred?

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V. Text

Sample Primary Sources: cookbooks

Research the recipe for a common food (examples: bread, cake) in cookbooks of different times. Report on differences in the vocabulary of the cookbooks over time. How have terms for measurement, ingredients, portion size, and accompaniments changed? Prepare the food from recipes of two of the time periods you find. Hold a taste test of the end results.

Select a cookbook from another era. Look at the ingredients lists from a large number of recipes. What do the ingredients lists tell you about the types of foods available and the lifestyle of the time?

Sample Primary Sources: advertisements

Use old catalog pages to research fashion trends, household articles, cost of living, and lifestyles of a particular period. Use other sources of information to reconstruct a picture of family life at the time. Who did the household purchasing? What were considered necessities of the time? What were considered luxuries? How do the catalog pages highlight attitudes of the time?

Use newspapers over time to analyze advertising. Have students research advertisements for a particular type of product (clothing, tools, household appliances, automobiles) through history. What information do the advertisements contain? What claims do they make? Who is the target buyer? How has advertising for this product changed over time? What social changes are reflected by changes in advertising for this product?

Sample Primary Sources: journals, letters, diaries

Find first hand accounts of historical events written by children or young people (example: *Diary of Anne Frank*). Analyze how first hand accounts give context to historical events. Have students begin keeping their own journals with an emphasis on including current events topics in their entries.

Select a time period or era. Research and read personal letters that comment on events of the time. Analyze the point of view of the letter writer. Compose a return letter that tells the author how those historical events have affected modern society.

Read a personal diary from a historical period. Analyze the individual's character, motivations, and opinions. Explain how the individual changed over the course of the diary. How might that person react if they were dropped into the present time?

Sample Primary Sources: documents in the original handwriting or language

Decipher the original text of a famous document (examples: The Constitution, The Bill of Rights) by decoding historical lettering, spelling, grammar, and usage. Compare the original writing with printed versions of the document today. What has changed?

To help illustrate the writing process, study draft copies of famous documents. Look at how side notes, additions, and crossed out words were used to edit the document. Discuss how the changes affected the meaning of the finished work. Have students practice editing their own writing using similar tools.

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VI. The Community

Sample Primary Sources: family photographs (of ancestors and their homes), memorabilia, souvenirs, recipes, ancestors' clothes, ancestors' papers, oral histories, local historical societies, genealogical information

Make a record of family treasures (books, tools, musical instruments, tickets, letters, photographs) using photographs, photocopies, drawings, recordings, or videotapes. Put the treasures into the larger historical context of local, state, country, or world events. What was happening in the world when ancestors were using the family treasures? How did those events affect your family?

Find original letters from an ancestor. Read the letters and then research the time and events surrounding the letters in other sources. Analyze the opinions and views of the letter writer based on the time and events of the period.

Trace your ancestry to a country or countries of origin. Research customs, language, dress, foods, and cultural traditions of your ancestral country or countries. Prepare a class presentation of your cultural background. Include exhibits and recipes or prepared foods from your ancestral country. Describe how your family came to live in your community today.

Prepare a community time capsule with the class. What primary sources will you include to describe your present day community for future generations? What important information do you wish to convey? Which primary sources will get your message across? When should your time capsule be opened?

Sample Primary Sources: physical surroundings

Research the history of famous buildings and popular sites in your community through the local library or historical society. Use disposable cameras to make a visual record of those sites in the community as they appear today. Compare historical descriptions and older pictures of sites with your own photographs. What changes have occurred? Why?

Trace the age of buildings in your community. What is the oldest structure? What is the newest structure? Research styles of architecture, commonly used building materials, and the role of buildings through time. How do your community's buildings reflect the evolution of architectural styles and community institutions?

With the help of a local historical society, organize a tour of older homes in your community. Research the age and historical period of interesting houses you find. Who lived in these homes when they were first built? How do the style and location of the homes reflect the role of the original owners in the community? Research and describe furnishing and decorating styles from the time the homes were built. Do the homes look different today?

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MEDIA ANALYSIS TOOLS or worksheets guide students into deeper analysis of primary sources. View these tools at work in lessons to see how they might be used or adapted to your needs.

Life Histories

Examining a Life History guides students in preliminary reading comprehension of the document. Both lessons in the Living History Project use this tool.

Reading Life Histories in Brother, Can You Spare a Dime? prompts students to make inferences about a life history of a person in the Great Depression.

Objects

The Object Observation Worksheet can be used with any object, from an image to a piece of sheet music. Instructions are in The Photographer, the Artist, and Yellowstone Park, a lesson within the unit, Explorations in American Environmental History.

Photographs

Several forms of the Photograph Analysis tool exist depending on the lesson focus, displaying its versatility and scalability.

- The Photograph Analysis Guide in Photojournalism: A Record of War introduces students to content analysis of images.
- The Photographic Analysis Form of the Mathew Brady Bunch moves the basic form a bit deeper, asking students to think subjectively as well as objectively.
- Photo Study Guide in Brother, Can You Spare a Dime? asks specific questions about the photograph.
- A Research Guide in Mathew Brady Bunch leads students into an examination of the event that prompted the photograph.
- Three worksheets in Turn-of-the-Century Child separate objective and subjective content analysis and add artifact analysis. Data Sheet One concentrates on objective observations. Data Sheet Two focuses on inferences. Data Sheet Three focuses on the image as an artifact in a collection.

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Mid-point Assessment

1. Three or four weeks into the project, each group must submit a detailed outline of their particular focus topic.
2. The outline should be organized according to the categories established when the project was introduced.
3. Allow time for students to read and assess their peers' outlines.
4. The best outlines can be copied and distributed as examples to all students.

Presentations

As the individual group's focus topics together comprise a broader epic, it is strongly recommended that a half-day (at least) be set aside for group presentation in front of the entire class. If this is not possible, set aside class periods on consecutive days for the presentations.

1. Allow fifteen minutes of presentation time per group.
2. PowerPoint files should be loaded on the school network the day before to reduce the chance of technical glitches.
3. The presentation format may vary from group to group. Some groups may read sections with images flashing behind, while others may record their lines on PowerPoint. You may stipulate accordingly.
4. Each group must also submit a finished copy of its poem (and PowerPoint disk) with bibliography of sources consulted.
5. The overall goal of the presentation day is immersion in the time. Students not only share their work but also allow other aspects of 1900 American to wash over them.

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